

Tabb Street Presbyterian Church
21 W. Tabb Street
Petersburg
Virginia

HABS No. VA-658

HABS
VA
21-PET,
30-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. VA-658

TABB STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Location: 21 West Tabb Street, between North Union Street
and North Sycamore Street.

Present Owner: Tabb Street Presbyterian Church

Present Occupant: Tabb Street Presbyterian Church Congregation

Present Use: Church

Brief Statement
of Significance This church is a fine example of Greek Revival
design, with its distinctive handling of the
Doric portico, the body of the church, and the
Corinthian order in the interior. This building,
erected in 1843, is the third structure to house
the congregation which was founded in 1813 and
has served as the mother congregation of Presby-
terianism for a large part of southern Virginia.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1843
2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners: The property was pur-
chased by the Church on Dec. 1, 1841, from John R. and
Elizabeth Armistead and John M. Brown. (Deed book 12,
page 283, in Clerk's Office, Hustings Court, Petersburg).
4. Original plans and construction: Unknown. The following
account of the construction of the steeple (now removed)
is from the July 26, 1843 issue of the Peterburg Repub-
lican:

"We witnessed on yesterday evening the novel spectacle
of the raising of the steeple of the Presbyterian
church a new and handsome edifice which has recently
been erected on Tabb Street, near the ruins of the
place of worship formerly belonging to the same con-
gregation.

"The frame of the steeple was completed, and partly covered in as it stood on the ground, and it was raised to its position by block and tackle, much after the fashion of what, we believe, ship carpenters call, stopping a mast. The operation occupied about three hours, and was conducted with great skill and precision. ...It's height from surface of the earth is 153 feet."

Of interest is the old bell from the steeple of the church which is presently stored in the vaulted chamber under the portico porch and is inscribed as made by T. W. and R. C. Smith of Alexandria, D. C., 1844.

5. Alterations and additions: The following notes are taken from various newspaper and other articles relating to the church:

Fire of unknown origin in the steeple.
March 25, 1857 issue of the Southside Democrat, Petersburg.

"We understand that the splendid organ, destined for the Tabb Street Presbyterian Church, in this city, is expected to arrive about the first of next month. Its cost is about \$3,000, and it is represented to be an instrument of great power and most superior tone."
November 15, 1867 issue of The Petersburg Index.

Repairing and painting of interior of church commenced.
August 5, 1871 issue of The Petersburg Index.

During strong wind steeple rocking with gale.
February 12, 1876 issue of the Petersburg Index Appeal.

"Prompt steps have been taken to strengthen and repair the steeple of the Tabb street church, which was weakened by the recent severe gale. The steeple will be made as strong as ever."
February 17, 1876 issue of the Petersburg Index Appeal.

Completion of Sunday School addition to church of 27 rooms.

Ruffin, Sally Walthall, History of Tabb Street Presbyterian Church.

Tabb Street Church spire termed hazard, will be razed. May 23, 1938 issue of Petersburg Progress-Index.

Steeple removal completed.

June 9, 1938 issue of Petersburg Progress-Index.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

During the Federal shelling of Petersburg in 1865, the story is told, a shell entered the church above the gallery between the second and third windows and went diagonally across the church and was embedded in the opposite wall below the gallery between the first and second windows. The shell did not explode and was not removed.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views:

Published water-color sketch of William S. Simpson in the Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville of the 1840's. James G. Scott and Edward A. Wyatt, IV, Petersburg's Story (Petersburg: Titmus Optical Company, 1960), p. 34 approx.

Published sketch showing the arrival of Union troops in Petersburg in April, 1865 at the intersection of Tabb and Union Streets providing an incidental glimpse of Tabb Street Church. Harpers Weekly, April 22, 1865, p. 252.

Unpublished photograph showing church with steeple, c. 1910. Tabb Street Presbyterian Church collection.

2. Bibliography:

Edward Avery Wyatt, IV, Along Petersburg Streets (Richmond: The Dietz Printing Company, 1943)

Sally Walthall Ruffin, compiler, "History of Tabb Street Presbyterian Church," One Hundreth Anniversary Celebration of the Dedication of Tabb Street Presbyterian Church, Petersburg, Virginia (January 23-25, 1944).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The church is an excellent Greek Revival Church. The two prominent features of the building are its peristyle facade with six large fluted Doric columns capped by a large moulded pediment and, on the interior, the handsome sanctuary with its sophisticated detailing.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is particularly noteworthy because it is in such good condition, particularly the interior auditorium space.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions and shape: The building is "T" shaped, the top of the "T" being an addition of 1923. The original building is approximately 75' (street side) x 85'. The addition is approximately 36' x 98' and projects about 12' on either side of the original building. The original building includes a ground floor plus auditorium floor & balcony. The addition is three stories.
2. Foundations: Granite blocks with rough mortar joints.
3. Wall construction: The ground floor exterior walls of the original building are rough cut granite with unfinished mortar joints. Auditorium walls are brick faced with stucco, scored to simulate ashlar blocks, and painted. Addition walls are brick.
4. Chimneys: There are no chimneys in the original building. There is one brick chimney in the northeast corner of the addition which rises 15' above the roof.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Massive doorway front exterior way. The frame is approximately 10' wide by 25' and is capped by a large granite head (within 6' of the bottom of the porch roof). The large double doors (5' x 12' a.), as well as those at the balcony level, open off of this frame. There is wood paneling between the lower and upper doors carried through

with the same style as the doors thus giving the appearance at first glance of one large double doorway 25' high. The other exterior entrances in the original building are large double doors at the ground level on either side (East and West) and just at the base of the steps from street level. The doors themselves do not appear to be original.

- b. Windows and shutters: At the auditorium level there are four large window bays, each side in the original portion. They are actually double windows butted together, separated vertically by a 10" wide common jamb. The window frame extends the height of the main floor and balcony, in a fashion similar to the large front door, and the main floor and balcony windows are separated at the exterior by wood panels with decorative wood trim strips in a criss-cross pattern. The main floor windows are double-hung, with nine lights in each sash - total twelve with each light 8" x 14". The balcony windows are double-hung with six lights in each sash. There are shutters that extend the full height of the frame - all have original shutter latches or identical replacements. The ground floor windows are similar but are not double as are the main floor windows and there are only three each side. They are double-hung with twelve lights each, with shutters but no shutter latches. The front elevation has no windows.

- 6. Porches: There is a large portico porch at the entry. The Height of the porch floor is approximately 5' above street level and is reached by five granite steps that extend the full length of the facade, the steps being terminated at each end by a projecting granite wall that extends out from the granite porch floor. The portico is a covered colonnade, Greek peristyle, with six large fluted Doric columns forming the outer enclosure.

7. Structural system:

- a. Walls: The walls are brick bearing walls above the granite foundation walls.
- b. Floors: There are large beams, exposed and plastered, at the ground floor auditorium space which are sup-

ported by pipe columns. The beams span between brick bearing walls. There are wood joists that span the ceiling of the lobby area (observed in the attic) and wood joists presumably span the lower floor as well, although it was inaccessible.

- c. Roof framing: Large wooden trusses span the main auditorium space. Wooden pegs are used for jointage and spanning between the trusses are rafters which are notched to slip over the top cords of the trusses.
- 8. Roof shape and covering: There is a gabled roof over the original portion. The addition has a flat roof; the top of the addition roof is approximately 10' below the bottom of the gabled roof. The roof covering is not known because it is inaccessible.
- 9. Cornice and eaves: A large moulded wood cornice projects approximately 3' from the wall line on East and West. The large pediment of Greek influence which projects at the front elevation is a distinctive feature of the building. The bottom edge of the pediment is an extension of the cornice (East and West).
- 10. Steeple: There was, until 1938, a large steeple rising from the front portion of the roof. The steeple bell is still in the possession of the church and is stored in the vaulted chamber below the portico porch.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: There are two full floors plus a balcony in the original building. The ground floor is approximately 12' below street level. It is divided into four areas, backed one against the other. The entry space forms a lobby area and is located directly below the lobby of the main floor. To the north of the space and directly under the portico is a cellar-like space of rock walls and brick floor with a vaulted ceiling. This is a long rectangular place and is said to have been used as a bomb shelter during the siege of Petersburg in 1865. To the opposite side of the ground floor lobby are two areas - classroom spaces, divided by a wide hall leading to the fourth area - a large auditorium space. Both of these areas are directly below the main sanctuary space. The main floor is about

5' above street level and contains one primary space, the sanctuary, and one service space, the lobby. (The sanctuary is entered from the lobby through three double doors.) The altar is directly opposite the entry to the sanctuary. Seating is divided by five aisles. Three main aisles (including one in the center) and two wall aisles. The balcony is reached from stairs in the lobby and frames three sides of the auditorium - the rear and both sides.

2. Stairways: An open stairway on each side of the main lobby leads up to the balcony, and down to the ground floor. The stair rail is enclosed with a mahogany bannister. A small enclosed stair leads from the balcony to the attic. In the addition there are two stairs, one on each end (East and West).
3. Flooring: The floors of the sanctuary and balcony are hardwood. Modern carpet has been placed wall to wall in the sanctuary. The ground floor auditorium flooring is hardwood and the classroom and lobby spaces are concrete. The floor of the small cellar-like room is brick. All addition floors are hardwood.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: In the original building, all walls and ceilings are plaster finish (painted) except for exposed foundation walls (granite) of the space under the front porch. The sanctuary space is particularly handsome with light green walls and white trim - it seems to expand space beyond its actual boundaries. All addition walls and ceilings are plaster finish (painted).
5. Doorways and doors: As previously noted, there are three double doors leading from the main lobby to the sanctuary, the center one being the largest, and further distinguished by a large cornice-like moulded wood lintel above. No other outstanding characteristics concerning the doors.
6. Decorative features and trim: These are primarily in the sanctuary space. The flat ceiling has, at its center, a number of decorative panels, probably of moulded plaster, organized in a circular pattern. Radiating from metal star of David at center (which encloses support for suspended lighting fixture) to a distance of about 8' are a number of thin (2") strips organized in star burst pattern. Surrounding

this decoration is a series of panels in a 'donut' shaped pattern. On both the interior and exterior rings of the 'donut' is an egg and dart moulding. Along the periphery of the sanctuary ceiling are large rectangular panels projecting about 2" below the ceiling and with recessed rectangular center areas (flush with the ceiling). There is an egg and dart moulding along the edge of the panels. Along the north interior wall (apse) there is a series of six fluted thin columns with composite capitals - (probably wood) - The columns, parallel to the curved apse (the curve begins at the balcony on each side), are recessed but free standing. Along most of the auditorium walls is a decorative paneled wood wainscot 3' high and even with top of pews. The balcony rail (solid) also has decorative rectangular panels. The pulpit is very large with detailed decorative moulding. All sanctuary trim and paneling is painted white.

- 7. Lighting: Modern
- 8. Heating: Steam radiators

D. Site and Surroundings:

- 1. Orientation and general setting: The building faces South on W. Tabb St., one block west of the main commercial district. It is flanked on the East by the Masonic Hall, and on the West by the Church Vestry, both of some historic significance.
- 2. Terrain: The building is set back about 15' from the street and slopes off steeply at this point to a level about 12' below the street level.
- 3. Landscaping, fences, and walks: Wide steps lead down each side of the front to the ground level. The walk (approximately 8' wide) then parallels the exterior wall back to a point of entry in the addition on each side. In the front there is a cast iron fence with large concrete piers for supports at intervals along the line of the fence: this fence continues along the property in front of the Church Vestry but without the concrete piers.

Prepared by John M. McRae
Project Supervisor
HABS
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of the documentation made during the 1968 Petersburg Summer Project, undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with The Historic Petersburg Foundation, Inc., with financial assistance from The Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. During the summer, records were made of twenty-two buildings in the city.

The project was under the general direction of James C. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Supervisor was John M. McRae of the University of Florida. The recording team was composed of Randall J. Biallas, historian (University of Illinois, Urbana), and student assistant architects Michael Hamilton (University of Arizona), Thomas J. Sanford (Washington State University), and Edwin S. Smith, Jr. (Rhode Island School of Design). Photographs were made by George Eisenman.